

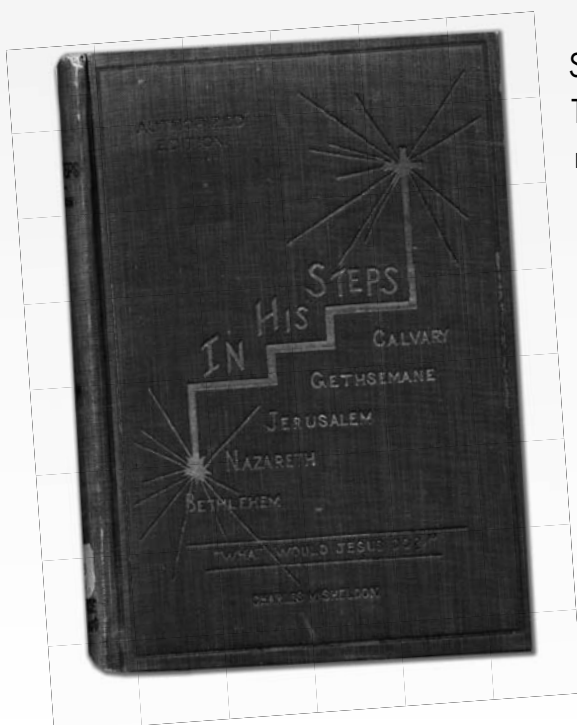
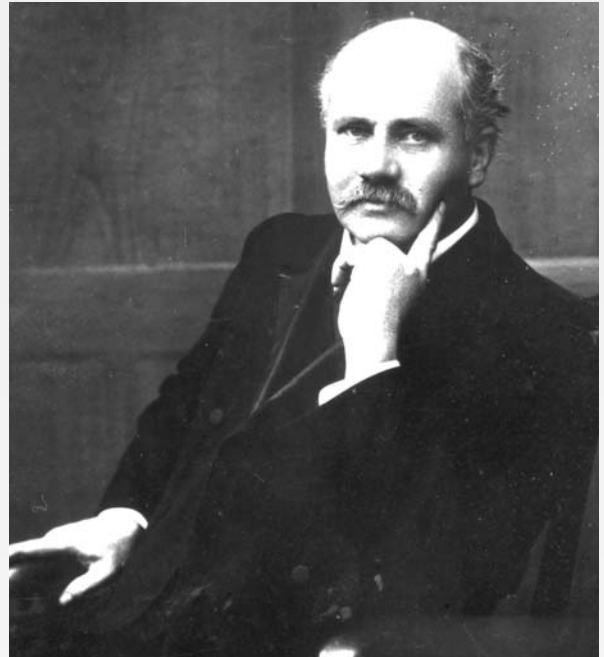


By the Kansas Historical Society

## Charles M. Sheldon A Prominent Religious Leader

Charles Sheldon was a social reformer from Topeka. He dedicated his life to improving the lives of workers, minorities, and women. Sheldon came to Topeka in 1889 as the first pastor of Central Congregational Church. He became an important religious leader in America.

Sheldon offered Sunday night sermons at his church, but not many people attended the service. So Sheldon changed his method. He began telling stories based on the experiences of downtrodden people. He did not complete the story each week. People had to return the next Sunday to hear the next chapter of the story. His stories became so popular that religious magazines began to publish them as serials (weekly series).



Sheldon often based his stories on his own experiences in Topeka. He would disguise himself and spend time in poorer neighborhoods of the city. Once he spent a week in the industrial section of the city. By pretending to look for employment he obtained first-hand knowledge of local working conditions. From the information he gained as an "unemployed tramp" Sheldon created his Sunday evening stories. Eventually these stories were published as a book, *In His Steps*.

*In His Steps* was his most popular work. It begins with a shabbily dressed stranger entering a church one Sunday morning. The stranger, who looked like an ordinary tramp, interrupted the service to tell his story. He was a printer by trade. His job was to set the pieces of type in a printer's tray for every page printed. He lost his job because of a new machine, the linotype. It allowed newsmen to set the printer's type much faster than by hand. The stranger's wife had died of malnutrition and unsanitary conditions in the tenement where they lived.



Scene from illustrated slide showing the stranger speaking to Sheldon's congregation.

The stranger said:

*I've tramped through this city for three days trying to find a job; and in all that time I've not had a word of sympathy or comfort except from your minister here, who said he was sorry for me and hoped I would find a job somewhere . . . Of course I understand you can't all go out of your way to hunt up jobs for people like me. I'm not asking you to; but what I feel puzzled about is, what is meant by following Jesus?*

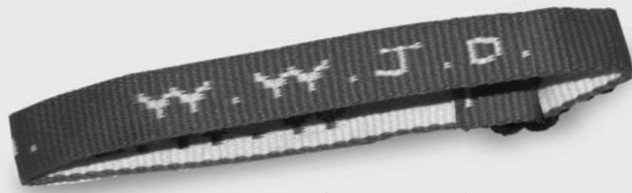
As the story continues, listeners are shocked when the poor stranger collapses to the church floor and dies a few days later. The death of the man led the minister of the church to question himself and the faith of his congregation. This tragedy caused the minister to call his followers to join him in making a pledge. They agreed to live their lives for one year as they believed Jesus would live in today's world. The plot continues as the followers slowly change the local social conditions by answering the call, "What Would Jesus Do?"

Many Topekanians thought they could identify most of the "fictional characters," which made for good local gossip. The popularity of the book did not stop there. *In His Steps* became one of the best selling novels of all time. It sold tens of millions of copies throughout the world. The exact number of copies is unknown because of a problem with the copyright agreement. More than 70 publishers from around the world copied the book and sold it through their companies without paying Sheldon for the rights. The success of this novel is shown by the 25 different translations ranging from Arabic to Japanese.



Arabic

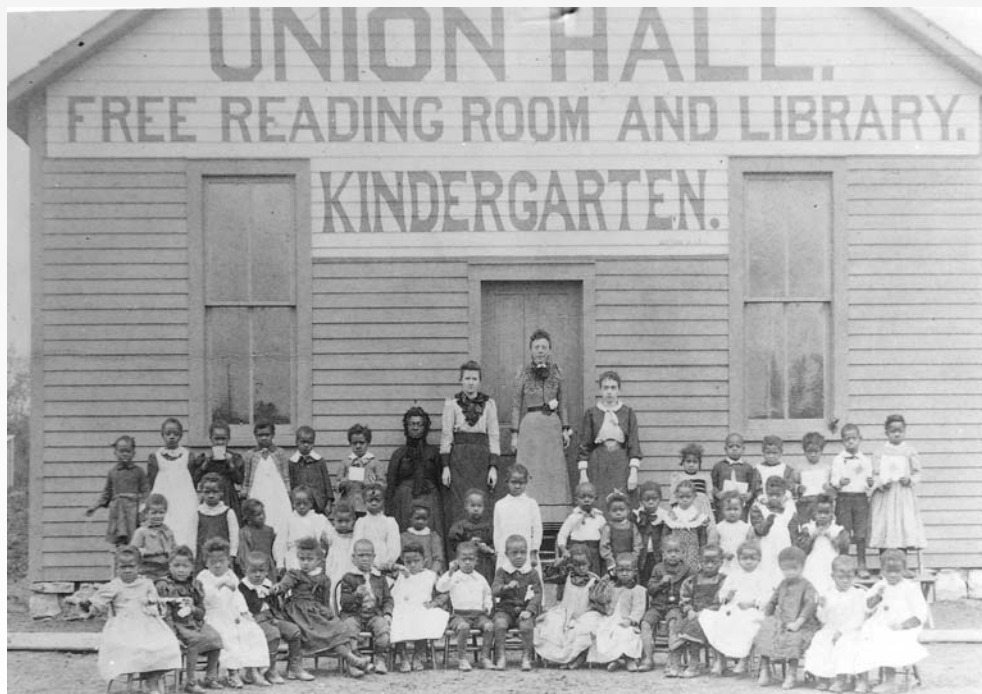
Japanese



*"What Would Jesus Do?" This simple question impacted Christians around the world. Even today people are seen wearing bracelets that remind them of this message.*

Sheldon's fame consisted of more than his stories based on morality. Central Congregational Church was located next to a section of Topeka called Tennesseetown. This neighborhood consisted of formerly enslaved African Americans (called Exodusters) who had moved from disastrous living conditions in the South. They had been told they would find cheap land and be welcome in Kansas. They soon realized this wasn't always true. By 1880 more than 40,000 Exodusters had passed through Topeka. Nearly 3,000 stayed and settled in an area southwest of the city. Many Topekans were upset about the arrival of such large numbers of poor, uneducated people.

Sheldon began to study the living conditions of Tennesseetown. He spent three weeks living among the residents. He soon discovered that most of the men were either unemployed or underpaid in their jobs. Sheldon knew that this settlement needed social services. The first major effort was a kindergarten. Sheldon and members of his church started a fundraiser to obtain a building. Young members of the church worked in the evenings to plaster and paint the structure. On April 3, 1893, the first black kindergarten west of the Mississippi River opened its doors. Children were taught the alphabet and numbers. They also formed a marching band, maintained a garden, and learned sewing and weaving.



Tennesseetown school continued until 1910. The school ended when the Topeka school system opened its own kindergartens. The Tennesseetown children then attended Buchanan Elementary, a segregated school.



Sheldon enjoyed visiting the Tennesseetown Kindergarten and seeing the children's progress. One child in particular caught his attention. His name was Elisha J. Scott. Sheldon monitored Scott's progress through school. In 1916 Scott wanted to attend Washburn College in Topeka. Sheldon began to provide him with financial support. Scott graduated with a law degree and started his own law firm. He became an influential African American lawyer. Throughout his career he argued many civil rights and school segregation cases. Eventually Scott's two sons, John and Charles, joined their father's law firm. Together they began the local prosecution of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark civil rights case that marked the end of school segregation.

In 1920 Sheldon retired as minister of the Topeka Central Congregational Church. He died from complications of a stroke in 1946.

